

COMBS WITH PERFORATED HANDLES

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INTRODUCTION

One of the most characteristic bone or antler comb forms of the Middle and Late Saxon periods consists of a series of single-sided composite combs which are equipped with handles. The origins of the comb type go back to the seventh century and may have been influenced by contemporary asymmetric combs which were being manufactured in the Merovingian kingdoms at that time, as well as in Frisia (Roes 1963, 23-4; MacGregor 1985, 87; von Freeden 1987, 549-50). Whilst asymmetric combs were favoured on the Continent, handled combs prevailed in Anglo-Saxon England. Large collections of handled combs have come from pre-Viking trading centres, including *Hamwic*, Ipswich and York, and smaller quantities are known also from Canterbury and London (Riddler, Trzaska-Nartowski and Hatton, forthcoming; Rogers 1993, 1388-94; Blockley *et al.* 1995, 1163-6; Riddler 1990a). They have also been found at monastic sites, as well as on rural settlements, and they are widely distributed across contexts which extend in date from the eighth to the eleventh century. The latest Anglo-Saxon examples can be placed in the eleventh century, although the comb type continued in use into the medieval period in Scandinavia (Waterman 1959, 90; Grieg 1933, fig. 183; Blomqvist 1942, 136 and fig. 10; Herteig 1969, pl. 42).

Within the growing corpus of handled combs several types can be identified, a situation which echoes the observations of Hodges on the potential cultural and economic significance of comb groups (Hodges 1980, 145). Alexander has demonstrated that combs with two-piece rivetted handles represent a Northumbrian variant, and this has been confirmed by recent discoveries (Alexander 1987; Jackson in Daniels 1988, 195; Rogers 1993, 1393). With the exception of a comb with a two-piece handle from North Elmham, all southern examples have single-piece handles and the Northumbrian variant

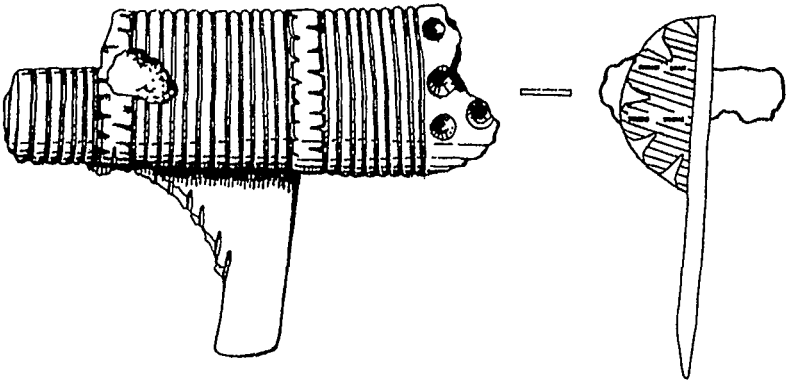


Fig. 1. Comb fragment from St. George's Clocktower. Scale 1:1

remains in a minority (Wade-Martins 1980, fig. 259.5). Combs with single-piece handles have also been found in Northumbria (Rogers 1993, fig. 679.5569 and 5570).

One particular decorative motif has also been used to distinguish a group of handled combs of late-Saxon date. This decoration consists of a series of holes which have been drilled into the antler handle creating, in some cases, a small hollowed chamber (Riddler 1990a, 14; 1990b). Two recent discoveries of combs with perforated handles from Canterbury allow elements of this particular type of comb to be explored in a little more detail.

A fragment of a comb with a perforated handle came from a tenth-century context at Broad Oak Reservoir, and a slightly larger section of a similar type of comb has come from excavations at St. George's Clocktower in Canterbury (Fig. 1). The latter comb comes from a context of early medieval date. Although comparatively little of either comb survives, their perforated handles allow them to be conclusively identified to type.

The Broad Oak Reservoir comb consists of a small section of the end of the antler handle, as well as a separate part of a front end segment. The end of the handle is decorated by two bands of incised lines, within which lies an area of fret pattern. Beyond this, the handle has been perforated by at least three rows of splayed holes and it has also been hollowed.

A little more survives of the comb from St. George's Clocktower. The antler handle and fragmentary connecting plate are again decorated by bands of incised lines which alternate with sections of fret pattern. Three rows of splayed indentations of a smaller diameter have been cut into the handle, but they do not pierce it and the surviving part

of the handle has not been hollowed. The comb also includes an antler back end segment with a curved graduation of its teeth, secured to its connecting plates by an iron rivet.

Although the two comb fragments are very similar in terms of their decoration, it is clear that two distinct forms of perforation can be distinguished. In one case the handle is both perforated and hollowed; in the second case, it is merely indented. The two forms of decoration are similar but combs which have been both perforated and hollowed possess, in effect, an additional component to their overall design. With this in mind, it is important to distinguish between the two forms of adornment. Accordingly, the first type of adornment is described here as perforated, and the second as indented.

HANDLED COMB STUDIES

The first fragment of a comb of this type to be published came from St. Neot's in Cambridgeshire. Its handle has three rows of splayed holes, which are indented. The comb fragment was retrieved from a rubbish pit on a site considered to be of late Saxon date (Lethbridge and Tebbutt 1933, 150 and fig. 3.2).

At roughly the same time that this fragment was published, Holwerda illustrated numerous bone and antler objects from Dorestad, which included several handled and asymmetric combs (Holwerda 1930, 88-93 and afb. 72). Handled combs were briefly described by Hübener, who did not believe that they were manufactured at Dorestad (Hübener 1953, 187). Roes subsequently reviewed the comb type and noted that they were fairly common in Frisia (Roes 1963, 22-3; 1965, 63). She republished three examples previously illustrated by Janssen but identified three further fragments as handles, without realising that these also came from combs (Roes 1965, pl. XXV.194-5, and XXVII.201; Riddler 1990b, 177). Amongst these is a small fragment of a perforated handle which is similar to the fragments from St. Neot's and Broad Oak Reservoir, although it includes two bands of indented or perforated designs. One set of these perforates the handle, whilst the other is merely set into it. This remains the only other comb of the group to include two bands of decoration which encompass both the indented and the perforated forms.

The first major study of handled combs was undertaken by Waterman, in considering two examples from York (Waterman 1959, 89-90). He rightly observed that the handled comb 'is possibly of Frisian origin or at least owes its distribution to Frisian trading activities' and suggested that trade with Dorestad was instrumental in promoting the

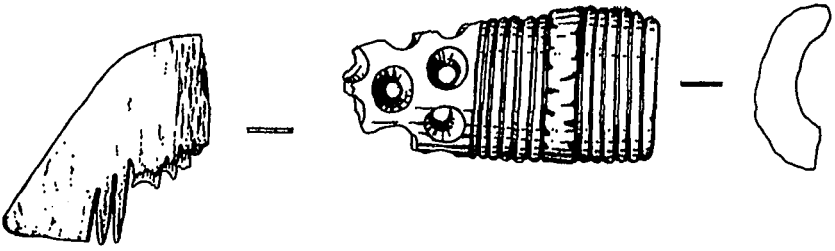


Fig. 2. Comb fragments from Broad Oak Reservoir. Scale 1:1

dissemination of the comb type (Waterman 1959, 90). De Hoog's subsequent assertion that the comb type is most common at Dorestad has no basis in fact, however (de Hoog 1984, 5:E12). Indeed, Hodges has noted that the majority of handled combs have come from Anglo-Saxon England and not from the Continent (Hodges 1980, 145). The distribution of combs with perforated or indented handles reinforces this statement, with the majority of examples coming from East Anglia and southern England and two coming from trading centres along the North Sea littoral. In broader terms, Tempel's corpus of eighteen handled combs from that area can be compared with a figure of currently just under 200 for Anglo-Saxon England (Tempel 1979, 170). This is not to deny that the handled comb may have had its origins in Frisian comb design, as Waterman rightly suggested (Riddler forthcoming a). At any event, the comb type was taken up with enthusiasm by Anglo-Saxon craftsmen and handled combs were already widely distributed and relatively common by the middle of the eighth century.

Aside from the fragment from Dorestad, the only other comb of this particular perforated or indented type to have been found in Continental Europe comes from Haithabu (Ulbricht 1978, 67-8 and Taf. 34.6; Riddler 1990b). Here also, incised line decoration is alternated with fret patterns and three rows of splayed holes perforate the antler handle, which has been hollowed. The hollowed handle has been sealed by a small ceramic plug (Ulbricht 1978, Taf. 34.6). Few plugs survive *in situ* within the hollowed handles of combs. Aside from the Haithabu comb, antler plugs remain in handled combs from Barton Court Farm and Ipswich (de Hoog 1984, 5:E11 and fig. 107.2; Riddler, Trzaska-Nartowski and Hatton, forthcoming). The comb from Barton Court Farm, which is clearly of tenth-century date (Riddler 1990a, 15) is unusual because, although the handle is hollowed, it is not

perforated. The Ipswich comb, in contrast, is both hollowed and perforated (Fig. 3). A series of both bone and antler combs possess hollow handles which may originally have been blocked by plugs, although these no longer remain in the handles. They include combs from Brandon, Canterbury, *Hamwic* and Ipswich (Riddler 1990b, 179; Blockley *et al.* 1995, fig. 513.1174). Most - but not all - of these combs have perforated handles, and the majority are of late Saxon date.

HOLLOWED HANDLES OF BONE AND ANTLER

In the case of antler combs with perforated handles it would have been possible for objects or substances to be inserted into the hollowed area, which could be secured by an antler or ceramic plug. The material would need to be reasonably large and anhydrous, in order to remain within the cavity and not to spill out from the rows of holes. Two possible forms of material can be envisaged. The first consists of plant remains, which may merely have been fragrant or pungent, but could also have been maintained for their amuletic value. Meaney has described several plants recorded in Anglo-Saxon texts which could be hung about the neck, held by the head, or merely kept by the body in order to ward off illness or insanity (Meaney 1981, 38-65). The plant adderwort, or bistort (*polygonum bistorta L.*), is of particular interest in this respect because of the prescription within the Old English Apuleius to 'enclose it in gold and silver, and in stag's antler and in ivory and with boar's tusk, and in bull's horn', which implies that it was carried within settings of different materials, which include antler. According to Apuleius, the plant was retained as a preventive against snakes (Meaney 1981, 50-1).

The second, if perhaps less likely alternative, is that the cylindrical space was hollowed for the reception of a small relic. Werner has drawn attention on several occasions to a series of ivory buckles from central Europe which were designed to hold small relics (Werner 1977, 323-37; 1990; MacGregor 1985, 104). Such objects are proficiently designed with figural panels, and were sometimes inscribed (Werner 1990, Abb. 2 and 8). In terms of both raw material and design, however, they are a great deal more elaborate than antler combs with perforated handles, although both types of object retain small chambers designed to accommodate either objects or substances.

It is also worth noting that an unpublished handled comb from *Hamwic* has been decorated with an explicit cross motif, suggesting that its owner was a Christian, and handled combs were certainly used within Anglo-Saxon monasteries. Examples are known from

Hartlepool, Jarrow and Whitby, and two unpublished pieces have recently come from excavations within the Outer Court of St. Augustine's Abbey in Canterbury (Daniels 1988, fig. 37.1; Riddler forthcoming b; Peers and Radford 1943, fig. 20.1). Equally, however, none of the handled combs with perforated handles has come from an ecclesiastic context and combs found in Anglo-Saxon monasteries do not differ markedly from those discovered in other contexts. The hollowed chambers within handled combs probably contained pungent remains, rather than any other substance.

DISTRIBUTION

An initial survey of combs with perforated handles indicated that the majority had been found in East Anglia (Riddler 1990b, 179). Six of the fifteen examples now known have come from East Anglia, and three are from the Canterbury area. Within East Anglia, examples are known from Brandon, Flatford Mill, Ipswich, Saffron Walden, St. Neot's and Sedgeford, and there is an outlier at Goltho in Lincolnshire (Riddler, Trzaska-Nartowski and Hatton, forthcoming; Bassett 1982, fig. 51.10; Beresford 1975, fig. 36.3). Three examples have now come from Canterbury, amidst a collection which currently amounts to ten handled combs. The earliest handled combs from Canterbury, which are of Middle Saxon date, come from the outskirts of the city at St. Martin's Hill and Christ Church College, although one comb of this date came from the Marlowe Theatre excavations (Rady 1987, 195 and fig. 29.52; Blockley *et al.* 1995, fig. 514.1175). Late Saxon examples, which have come from within the city at Mint Yard, the Marlowe Theatre and Watling Street, as well as St. George's Clocktower and Broad Oak Reservoir, are decorated over the entire handle and along one of the connecting plates (Riddler forthcoming c; Blockley *et al.* 1995, fig. 513.1174; Brent 1879, pl. 17.3). The combs are thereby provided with display sides, a fashion which is likely to be of Frisian origin (Tempel 1972, 57). All of the combs are made from antler and all but one are decorated by alternate bands of incised lines and fret patterns.

DATING

Combs with perforated or indented handles have mostly come from deposits of tenth-century date, although it should be noted that comparatively few are from well-dated contexts. A tenth-century dating can be applied to the two examples cited here, as well as to the

comb from Haithabu. The Ipswich comb comes, however, from an eleventh-century context.

Several combs can be assigned to the tenth century on typological grounds. The handled comb from the Marlowe Theatre is perforated through a raised area at the end of the handle. This raised moulding, together with the closely-spaced rivetting of the tooth segments, allow the comb to be placed in the tenth century, although it came from a context of medieval date (Riddler 1990a, 15).

CONCLUSIONS

Combs with perforated or indented handles, a number of which are also hollowed, can generally be assigned to the tenth century, although some may be of eleventh-century date. The hollowed chambers usually occur with perforated examples and they would probably have been used to store pungent, aromatic plant remains, possibly for amuletic purposes. The chambers were sealed by antler or ceramic plugs.

The comb type appears to be of Anglo-Saxon, southumbrian origin and it is centred on East Anglia, although several examples are now known from Canterbury. Related combs with perforated handles from Dorestad and Haithabu are liable to have come originally from England.

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